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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Anna M. Klobucka and the editorial board of JFS for incisive feedback and guidance with this essay.

PHOTO-ESSAY

Recreating and Reenvisioning Scandal: A Photographic Exploration of the Eliot Spitzer and Anthony Weiner Press Conferences

Essay by Hinda Mandell, Rochester Institute of Technology

Photographs by Meredith Davenport, Rochester Institute of Technology

An odd thing happens to one's psychological profile when spending nearly a decade studying political sex scandals in the US. At first there was the excitement of studying—in a scholarly way—a topic that is scintillating and sensational. It felt subversive, the act of applying an academic approach to something so tabloidesque. I began my research pursuits as a doctoral student in 2008, fresh off the heels of the scandals belonging to Senator David Vitter of Louisiana (2007), Senator Larry Craig of Idaho (2007), Governor Elliot Spitzer of New York (2008), and Congressman Tim Mahoney of Florida (2008).¹ Additional scandals, starring South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford (now a congressman from that state) and Nevada Senator John Ensign, would shortly follow in 2009.² Sure, it was fun, but there also seemed to be a genuine need to investigate how news media cover these events, and how the public consumes them, considering that political sex scandals not only feed into a mistrust of government but can also occupy as much as 25 percent of all news stories at the time of the scandal (Anderson 2013). And, most importantly: These stories *tell stories* about narratives within our gendersphere.

After completing my doctoral program and accepting a tenure-track job, and after an initial onslaught of rejections from academic journals (“Why don’t you write on something more important like health care reform,” wrote one of the first anonymous reviewers to offer feedback on my work), I began landing my first publications in the field of communication and media studies. With a growing list of published work a few years after completing my PhD, I began to call myself a “scandal scholar,” whose work paid close attention to gender constructions and power imbalances in American political sex scandals in the twenty-first century.³

While each political sex scandal in the US is like a snowflake—unique in its own way—the overarching storyline is generally consistent: A seemingly straight, married, and white man engages in a sex act deemed inappropriate or unlawful. Research demonstrates that Republicans are more likely to have sex with someone other than their wives, and Democrats are more likely to engage in sexual harassment (Ingraham 2014; Mandell 2017). When the scandal cannot be contained, thanks in part to our ravenous media system and an eager public, the male politician typically releases a statement requesting privacy for himself and his family or acknowledges coded “personal failings,” “private failings,” and “wrongdoing” at a press conference, where his wife often stands next to him, looking as miserable as the philandering politician himself (Mandell 2017). Armchair quarterbacks offering their own analysis on political sex scandals have observed that those so often caught in scandals are reflective of the broader demographic makeup of American politicians as white, straight-identified men. While that may indeed be the case, the overwhelming absence of elite women politicians at the national level indicates that the preponderance of male scandal reveals something more

than “just” gender representation. It speaks to the way these politicians approach and abuse power and privilege while driven (or blinded) by personal desires.

Just when I felt that I was hitting my scandal research stride in April 2016, something happened in my brain as I was preparing to give a talk at a visual-communication conference in my hometown of Rochester, New York. The presentation, titled “From Hot to Not: Political Failure and Resilience When Illicit Selfies Go Viral” (Mandell 2016), would be a review of American politicians who got caught in selfie-sexting scandals, and a discussion of the visual narrative that emerges when private nude photographs of aroused male politicians circulate in the public sphere. I faced a conundrum because I felt literally unable to look at the pictures. It was as if I had reached a cognitive tipping point where my brain and gut both shouted “ENOUGH!” You’ve spent ENOUGH time over the past eight years contemplating, studying, investigating, and writing about the sexual transgressions of male (and overwhelmingly white) members of the political elite who were abusing their privilege and family. But I had a presentation to prepare for, and the conference programs were already printed, so I had no choice but to look at, probe, and engage with these images.

And, unfortunately, so did the American public during the 2016 presidential election. Indeed, if anyone had doubts about whether political sex scandals and the gendered images they produce hold relevance and sway in our culture and political system today, one only needs to consider how Anthony Weiner’s ongoing sex-scandal catastrophe shaped Hillary Clinton’s campaign for president of the United States. On October 28, 2016—a mere eleven days before the historic election that had the potential to land a woman in the White House—emails relating to the investigation of Clinton’s private email server were found on Weiner’s computer as a result of a separate investigation relating to his sexting with a fifteen-year-old girl from North Carolina, for which he was found guilty in 2017 and sentenced to 21 months in federal prison. While the Clinton email debacle played prominently in the presidential campaign, the FBI had already declared its investigation of her use of a private server for electronic correspondence a case closed (Goldman and Rappaport 2016). Now, the reopened case, coupled with Huma Abedin’s (Clinton’s top aide) declaration that she was seeking a marital separation from Weiner, indicated how profoundly one man’s unrelated sexual behavior could impact the career aspirations of the women connected to him (Chozick and Healy 2016). Ultimately, Clinton blamed FBI director, James Comey, for contributing to her election loss when he reopened the email inquiry less than two weeks before the electorate headed to the polls to elect the next president of the United States (Chozick 2016).

But long before this “October surprise” of 2016 I had the opportunity to work with the photographer Meredith Davenport, an associate professor in photojournalism studies at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), to recreate two of the most prominent political sex scandals in New York. I couldn’t previously fathom how these photographic recreations, with student actors playing the roles of Governor Eliot Spitzer and his then-wife, Silda Spitzer, and New York City Mayoral Candidate and former Congressman Weiner and his now estranged wife, Abedin, would allow me to reframe my intellectual frustrations that have built up over the past eight years in pursuing this line of “scandal work.” While Weiner and Abedin were still married at the time of our photographic scandal recreations in May 2016, Abedin announced their marital separation in August, after news reports and published photographs detailed Weiner’s third round of sexting. The former politician pleaded guilty that month to a federal charge of “transferring obscene material to a minor” in the case connected to the fifteen-year-old North Carolina girl, which was also linked to the FBI investigation of Clinton’s email server (Weiser and Rashbaum 2017).

Meredith and I had the opportunity to learn of each other’s work when we participated in a research panel at our university, titled “Interdisciplinary Looks at Troubling Images,” in September 2015. As a panel

member, Meredith presented a review of her book, *Theater of War* (2014), which chronicles “men playing games with air guns that are based on news reports and [veterans’] experiences in contemporary conflicts” (Davenport 2016). Meredith’s photojournalism work has been featured in *National Geographic*, *Newsweek*, and the *Smithsonian*, among other publications. Following the panel presentation, we both expressed interest to work together on a photographic recreation relating to scandal.

Our aim in this project was to upend the gender-normative scripts that we see in scandal press conferences, where the political wife (typically but not always silent) stands next to her husband in an expression of her support of him.⁴ As someone who devoted an entire doctoral dissertation to analyzing media coverage of political wives whose husbands were caught in sex scandals, it was my aim to view their actions through a feminist lens. As I argued in my dissertation:

Politicians may think that a wife’s composed silence indicates support for him. Yet a politician who puts his wife on silent display is not taking into account a key fact: The wife may not have a voice but her presence can still communicate negative emotions about her husband and the deeply uncomfortable situation he has dragged her into. In these instances, it is not possible to “silence” body language. The wife may be voiceless but her presence speaks powerfully about her predicament in orientation to her husband-politician. (Mandell 2011, 106)

Yet, as much as I approached the presence of political wives at sex-scandal press conferences through my feminist interpretation, it needs to be recognized that these women were also symbols of forgiveness. Because, while the wife’s presence no doubt shamed the philandering politician—after all, we can read her discomfort on her face—it is also true that “her presence implied compassion, concern and spousal unity” (Mandell 2012, 218), even if we can’t assume that she actually forgave him in private. What I was desperately seeking while studying the press conferences as “texts” were genuine displays of emotion appropriate to the nature of this very public and humiliating event, which in my mind would include outbursts of uncensored rage.

This is where the photography project with Meredith Davenport comes into play. By recreating a select number of scandal press conferences, we could restore complexity to the political wives who were too often depicted and constructed along a continuum of “sameness” (Mandell 2015a). After all, their worth as wives was determined to be subservient and existing in relation to the worth of their husbands as career politicians: When men step outside the bounds of acceptable sexual behavior, it is the wives who have the potential to bolster their reputations (and perceived power) for the public. “The ‘decorous’ woman who always knows her place, both in public and in relation to her husband, is what undergirds the masculinist regime” (Deem 1999, 88). But where were the impolite, indecorous, and unbecoming political wives, raging against a system that used them without regard for their individual humanity? Such figures could only exist through imagination, reinvention, and recreation.

We selected Spitzer’s and Weiner’s press conferences as the sites for this feminist photography project because they both received significant news coverage and were both based in New York. Additionally, Silda Spitzer’s presence at her then-husband’s press conference became the impetus for *The Good Wife* television show, which aired for seven seasons, from 2009 to 2016, on CBS. And Abedin has been regarded as a powerful behind-the-scenes political operative who was Hillary Clinton’s chief advisor (Stern 2016) while the presidential campaign was in full swing during our May 2016 scandal recreation.

We recruited students by posting flyers at key points around campus, and we cast student actors based on a resemblance to political figures they were supposed to embody. Each of the five actors received a

\$200 Amazon gift card as compensation, which was funded through an internal grant. We cast two “Silda Spitzers,” one “Huma Abedin,” one “Eliot Spitzer,” and one “Anthony Weiner.”

Davenport and I took great care to scout out venues at our university that resembled the actual press conference locations as much as possible. We selected and purchased Associated Press photographs from the press conference scenes that we’d work to recreate, and we secured—and in some cases made, with the help of student workers—props that became key objects in these photographs.⁵ These props included microphones with news-network covers, a “Weiner for Mayor” sign for the Weiner press conference, and an American flag for the Spitzer event. We also scoured online sites to purchase American flag lapel pins for the politicians and image-appropriate earrings for the women, as captured in the original Associated Press photographs, reproduced below. We rummaged through our wardrobes, and the wardrobes of colleagues, to secure a version of the dress Abedin wore and the politicians’ ties; the student actors filled in the rest from their own closets.



Photograph 1: In March 12, 2008, then New York Governor Eliot Spitzer announces his resignation amidst a prostitution scandal as then-wife Silda looks on in his offices in New York City.

(Photo by AP/Stephen Chernin)



Photograph 2: Huma Abedin stands beside her then-husband, New York mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner, as he speaks during a news conference at the Gay Men's Health Crisis headquarters on July 23, 2013, in New York. (Photo by AP/Kathy Willens)

We began each of the two student photo shoots by playing video clips of the actual press conferences and providing background information on each scandal to the student actors. We then proceeded with the photo shoot, which had two parts. The first part was an authentic reenactment of each scandal's selected Associated Press photograph (reproduced above). Then we proceeded to the second part, where we asked the student participants to act out how they envisioned the political figures *actually felt* in the moment.

Here are the results (all photos by Meredith Davenport):



Photograph 3: Two student actors perform as former New York First Lady Silda Spitzer and Governor Eliot Spitzer during his 2008 sex-scandal press conference.



Photograph 4: Student performers act out how they imagine the political couple actually felt during the Spitzer press conference.



Photograph 5: Another student performer acting as Silda Spitzer demonstrates her contempt at the press-conference recreation.

With only a bit of direction from Meredith and myself, the students let loose. The “wives” yanked their husband’s ties, they pummeled them with their fists and pushed them from their podium. They screamed. They raged. Not only did the reenactments and reenvisionings feel more authentic than the actual press conference, but I personally felt a moment of creative catharsis at witnessing the release of a political wife’s pent-up anger and a politician’s cowering cowardliness, both manifested in the faces and bodies of college students. They had the liberty to be genuine with the emotions in ways that decorum made inaccessible to the more privileged—and actual—political actors. This exercise brought home the extent to which privilege can be confining and the realization that there’s a price for its beneficiaries to pay.



Photograph 6: Two student actors perform as Huma Abedin and her then-husband Anthony Weiner during his 2013 sex-scandal press conference.



Photograph 7: The student performers act out how they imagined the political couple actually felt during the Weiner press conference.

I was not the only one to feel a sense of transformation through this project. The students themselves, who had only a baseline awareness of both scandals prior to their participation in this exercise (most were only twelve years old when the Spitzer scandal unfolded, for instance), said they felt uplifted by the process of bringing authenticity to a constricted moment of public performance. The Spitzer student actors in particular noted the formal, scripted atmosphere at the televised press conference. The student actor who played Eliot Spitzer observed that the real-life Silda Spitzer “doesn’t look like she wants to be there in the first place. She looks like she’s just there for support.” The women playing Silda Spitzer echoed that sentiment, with one of them noting, “She’s probably like, ‘Why am I up here dealing with this?’” Another student agreed: “She looks pretty composed, but you can tell that inside she’s not very happy with what’s going on. I think she’s pretty ashamed at what’s happened.”

After the photo shoot, I asked the student actors to debrief about the experience. One “Silda Spitzer” actor offered this reflection on her performance: “I feel like I was acting out on Silda’s behalf. Just because [typically] everyone’s really poised and it’s just not the reality of the situation, so I feel like by putting an image to what probably was the reality, and what was probably going through her head, was something that was long overdue.” I then asked her which Silda she liked performing better—the poised wife or the angry one? She answered: “Definitely the pissed-as-hell Silda. I don’t know how that’s going to reflect on me. But yeah, definitely that one—it was much more genuine, I think.”

Meanwhile, the student playing Eliot Spitzer hardly sympathized with his character. I asked him what was going through his head as “Silda” enacted her physical rage on him. “You can definitely tell the anger that’s going on, I mean subconsciously,” he said. “Translating it into actual physical strangling makes it

much more apparent that she's not happy, that she's very, very pissed off at Spitzer, and it's not a good relationship they have going on."

The two students playing Anthony Weiner and Huma Abedin expressed similar reactions to their own scandal reenactment experience. The actor who played Abedin said it was "very difficult" to reenact the scenes where the political wife stands politely next to her husband at the press conference: "I don't really understand how she was able to stand up there and be serious and not show all the emotions that she was probably feeling. So that was very difficult for me to pretend that everything was OK." She added it was much more liberating to unleash her anger at Weiner. "I liked playing angry Huma better because I was acting how I wish she would have acted, so I feel like I got vengeance for her," she said. Meanwhile, the student playing Weiner said the anger directed at him by the actor playing Abedin was justified: "It felt—I mean—probably justified, I wanna say. I was trying to be like, 'Why are you doing this? I don't deserve this! What's even going on? You're crazy!' So basically it was like, 'Yeah, I probably deserve to be beaten up. This is fine.'"

This project allowed us to reconfigure our thinking about political "good wives" by providing a space to attach new images to the iconic photographs of political wives standing in support of men who have caused them distress and humiliation by revealing private misdeeds with very public consequences for gendered suffering. In previous scholarship, I have argued that a gendered double bind exists for the scandalized "good wife," who

is a symbol that embodies an impossible ideal: unerring feminine support of a philandering husband. If she stands by him she is weak and wifely; if she stands in opposition to her husband she undercuts the sole purpose of a political wife: to bolster her husband within the public sphere. The good wife finds herself unable to extricate her gender from the very female problem of the double bind. (Mandell 2015a, 73)

By creating a photo shoot that allowed us to reenact and reenvision the stereotypic scandal press conference, we broke through the shackles of the gendered double bind, perhaps even providing a new visual format for political wives to live vicariously through these photographs. We flipped the script of the public peering into their personal lives by creating a public moment that decorum previously denied these women. Just as scandal unveils private misdeeds to the public, this photography project brought what is typically reserved as angered, heated, private interaction between husband and wife into the public sphere.

In so doing, we engaged in a feminist and women's studies enterprise to make women and their experiences visible to an image-consuming public that so often sees scandalized women in a supporting and taciturn role that is subservient to the powerful husband-politician. In keeping with the pedagogical practice of the interdisciplinary field of women's studies, our scandal recreations involved the "reexamination of old truths from a feminist or woman-oriented perspective as opposed to the male perspective" (Smith 2013, 26). Guided by the feminist belief that "women and men are inherently of equal worth" (Freedman 2002, 7), we sought to see political wives as human and as individuals—not as masked, unreadable, and therefore unknowable entities standing at a distance at scandal press conferences. Elsewhere, I have argued that press coverage of political wives places them on a "symbolic platform," tearing them down if they stand in support of their wandering husband and castigating them just the same if they defy their gendered script (Mandell 2015a, 73). Yet, by engaging in a fabricated but fact-based reenactment, we can lift the veil on a constricted gendered narrative, which allows us to make visible a human experience denied to a public so vested in scandal consumption. We may grasp intuitively "that human beings both live and tell stories about their living," according to narrative-inquiry scholar D. Jean Clandinin (2006, 44), yet we can also sense that wives standing next to scandal-tarnished husbands are not sharing their complete story. By

flipping the script through a scandal reenactment, we can seize new opportunities for unearthing women's lived experience when privilege and power shrouds certain public figures—and their authentic stories—in mystery. As Clandinin so wisely instructs us, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are” (51). Sometimes, as scholars, we must call upon ourselves to get creative in an effort to search for a truth in lived experience that may not stand transparently before us but lurks underneath. Through imagination and fabrication, we found authenticity in our rejection of gendered marital roles and expectations in public life by breaking down—at least temporarily—the script that wives step in line to their husbands’ expectations during times of crisis.

Notes

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1. David Vitter’s name was found in the “little black book” of the DC Madam, the pseudonym of a District of Columbia woman who arranged for men to have sex with prostitutes. Larry Craig was arrested, in 2007, in a Minneapolis airport bathroom for attempting to solicit sex from a male undercover cop; he pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct. Eliot Spitzer resigned as governor of New York in 2008 when he admitted to “private failings,” i.e., sex with prostitutes. Tim Mahoney of Florida, elected to replace disgraced Congressman Mark Foley (who resigned after having inappropriate sexual contact with male pages), admitted to having extramarital affairs and paying “hush money,” including to a woman on his congressional staff.

2. Mark Sanford told his staff he was “hiking the Appalachian Trail” when he was actually in Argentina having an affair with a woman who was not his wife. John Ensign had an extramarital affair with the wife of his staffer, a woman who also happened to be his wife’s best friend from high school.

3. For my single-authored and coauthored work on political sex scandals, see Mandell 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Martin and Mandell 2014; and Mandell and Masullo 2016.

4. As examples of political wives who stood publicly next to their husband at his scandal press conference, consider Diane Matos McGreevey in 2004, Wendy Vitter in 2007, Suzanne Craig in 2007, Terry Mahoney in 2008, Silda Spitzer in 2008, and Huma Abedin in 2013.

5. We would like to thank RIT student Alexis Montoya for her Photoshop skills that were evident in recreating the Weiner press conference.

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